

The B-70 Battle

Vinson's Drive to Boost Spending on Plane Is Only His Latest Defense-Shaping Effort

By PAUL DUKE

WASHINGTON—In this town of power politics, a test of wills over Pentagon policy that pits the Secretary of Defense, with the full support of the President of the United States, against an aging Congressman from the backwoods of Georgia, would appear to be a gross mismatch.

But when the legislator is Rep. Carl Vinson, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, nothing could be further from the truth. For "the Swamp Fox," as he is sometimes called, is a tough and stubborn man with a backwoodsy manner, crisp and curt speech, and a disdain for the ostentatious. As the Congressional voice in military affairs, Mr. Vinson has long been one of the most powerful as well as one of the most respected figures on Capitol Hill.

Presidents, generals and admirals have sought his advice and support since the days of Calvin Coolidge. One of Defense Secretary McNamara's first acts in office was to pay a courtesy call at Mr. Vinson's home. Pentagon officers invariably "clear it with Carl" before submitting their proposals to Congress. President Kennedy—born three years after Mr. Vinson's 1914 arrival in Washington—decided against pushing a new defense reorganization plan last year after receiving a Vinsonian "veto."

So Mr. Vinson's current attempt to force Mr. McNamara to spend an extra \$320 million to develop the B-70 bomber is far from a David and Goliath contest, but rather a battle between two equally fierce giants. While Mr. Vinson isn't expected to win a total victory, neither is he likely to suffer a total defeat. For the fact is the Administration cannot afford to be too rough on Mr. Vinson for fear of alienating a trusted lieutenant in the New Frontier's Southern division.

Such skirmishes certainly are not new to the 78-year-old Southerner, who once suggested that Congress should pass a bill decreeing that at least 95% of all defense appropriations must be spent. He frequently fought military cutbacks proposed by Presidents Truman and Eisenhower. "If we do too much in the way of arming we'll just lose dollars," he observes. "But if we do too little, we may lose American lives because of weakness and indecision."

Mr. Vinson's Battles

By and large, the pink-checked Mr. Vinson has fared well in his crusades for a stronger defense arm. In 1940 he pioneered in winning a two-ocean Navy despite objections from F.D.R. He battled for and won a bigger Air Force than Mr. Truman desired in the late 1940s. And in 1958, he succeeded in putting through his own Pentagon reorganization plan after sidetracking the one proposed by Mr. Eisenhower as smacking too much of strong-man Prussianism.

The Vinson base of power is his personal fiefdom, the 37-member Armed Services Committee. No other Congressional chairman exerts such dominant sway over a committee's affairs. Mr. Vinson not only sets the monetary ceilings for military procurement and construction bills, but he also drafts nearly all amendments and otherwise keeps a tight rein over the flow of bills from the unit. In Senate-House conferences, his word is usually final in framing compromise bills.

Those few who dare to challenge this supremacy usually regret it. The venerable veteran once dressed down a committee member who accused him of arbitrariness, declaring in utter seriousness: "As soon as I make a decision, I let the committee know about it." An audacious freshman who once heckled Mr. Vinson by tinkling the glass trinkets of a wall light found the next day that his secret weapon had been taped to abort a repeat performance. When Florida's Rep. Bennett succeeded in maneuvering a relatively minor bill through the committee over the chairman's opposition, Mr. Vinson promptly got it killed in the Rules Committee.

Ironie as it may seem, such iron-fistedness seems to have endeared Mr. Vinson to the committee all the more. "The Swamp Fox" is a sobriquet of esteem. Other nicknames, such as "the Admiral" or just plain "Uncle Carl," also reflect the affection he enjoys from his colleagues. For instance, Mr. Bennett, far from holding a grudge, unhesitatingly refers to Mr. Vinson as "the greatest man in Congress." And Virginia's Rep. Hardy maintains, "There isn't a man on the committee who doesn't have deep admiration for him."

Such testimonials of confidence are a tribute to the vast knowledge of military matters Mr. Vinson has acquired over 48 years. His chairmanship reign has lasted for 31 years, first with the old Naval Affairs Committee and later with the present enlarged unit. He has debated arms policy with 18 Secretaries of War and Defense and 33 commanding generals and admirals.

Because the committee is so solidly united behind him, Mr. Vinson's scorecard of suc-

cess in pushing through legislation is phenomenal; out of hundreds of bills he's favored over the years, only three—one would have established universal military training—have been voted down on the floor.

But the wily Mr. Vinson is not such a dictatorial overlord that he fails to remember the problems of committee members. They have little trouble obtaining funds for military projects in their districts. And it is not unusual for members to go flying around the world, ostensibly to check on conditions at some remote base but stopping off in Paris or Rome along the way.

Understandably, the military regards Mr. Vinson as a devoted friend because he generally sides with the officer corps against the civilian heads in major quarrels. But there have been exceptions. A drive to boost armed services outlays by \$400 million was headed for approval several years ago until Mr. Vinson unexpectedly denounced the move as unnecessary, stopping it cold. When the Navy kept pushing for new battleships after World War II, he turned, exasperated, to one officer and fumed: "Bring us a picture and we'll put it on the wall. The day of the battleship is over."

Above all, perhaps, Mr. Vinson is contemptuous of the military disease of pomposity. Glowering over horn-rimmed glasses that droop precariously close to the tip of a big red nose, he constantly prods wordy Pentagon witnesses to "get to the point." Generals and admirals have been treated as buck privates on occasion. One top-ranking officer, who made the mistake of trying to lecture the committee, shriveled when the screechy-voiced Mr. Vinson butted in: "Just a minute, general, what did you say your name was?"

A Switch on a Pentagon Bill

If such behavior keeps the brass hats off balance, the sometimes unfathomable Vinson ways perplex committeemen now and then, too. After telling Louisiana's Rep. Hebert to draft a strong bill to curb conflict-of-interest cases in the Pentagon, he suddenly switched signals and refused to sanction more than a diluted version. This propensity for doing as he pleases also led Mr. Vinson to announce his wholehearted support of the Kennedy legislative program at a 1961 Georgia Chamber of Commerce meeting, most assuredly not the most pro-Kennedy audience.

This unpredictability also gives rise to the criticism most often hurled at Mr. Vinson—that, at times, he vacillates. "He's the type who may have a different position for every day of the week," declares one colleague with a measure of exaggeration. Last week's debate on a non-military bill demonstrates the point. At issue was legislation to tighten Federal supervision of pension and welfare funds. Democratic leaders thought they had Mr. Vinson's support for a holy-contested amendment, only to discover him on the other side.

And, while Pentagon chiefs respect Mr. Vinson as a dedicated student of military affairs, some suspect he hasn't kept pace with the more advanced techniques of space age warfare. In the B-70 fight, for example, he accepted the Air Force's arguments down to the very penny in additional money requested by the service. And, despite Mr. McNamara's repeated warnings that "the B-70 has long been considered a very doubtful proposition with the weight of competent scientific, technical and military opinion against it for many years," Mr. Vinson has continued to push for extra money.

Preference for Trains

For all his kingly traits, Mr. Vinson's baggy-pants appearance conveys a provincialism that might easily mark him as just another cotton farmer from his native Milledgeville. He avoids plushy military functions, almost never inspects any of the military installations that benefit from the millions authorized by his committee and, in fact, rarely travels. He visited California once—in 1919. His lone trip out of the country was to the Caribbean some years ago. And, while waging the mighty battle for the supersonic B-70, he personally abhors flying and always takes the train home to Georgia.

His Dixie colloquialisms also betray a courtly shyness as he shuffles through the Capitol, now nodding gently to the young ladies, now lightly tapping his cane along the tile floors. Despite his toughness in combat, friends say the other side of Mr. Vinson is warm and understanding. They insist Mr. Vinson regrets his tiff with Messrs. Kennedy and McNamara, both of whom he deeply admires. Despite the feud, he still regards Mr. McNamara as the best boss the Pentagon has had.

The B-70 squabble has pointed out one thing to Messrs. McNamara and Kennedy: They have a stubborn foe on their hands. Perhaps the most telling clue lies in Mr. Vinson's reply, some time ago, to a facetious suggestion that he become Secretary of Defense. "I can run the Pentagon from the Hill," he snapped.